

Consultants as Nautical Navigators

A Metaphor for Group-Takers

Leroy Wells, Jr.

LEARNING ABOUT LIFE: A SEAFARING JOURNEY

Voyage involves movement, change, and difference, the traversing of time and space, be it sailing the high seas or contemplating the typography of the mind. Armstrong (1972) defines *voyage* as "the ongoing nature of life, the continued changes, the quests, the goals, the leave-taking and homecoming, the storm and the clear sailings, the struggles, the loneliness, the discoveries" (p. 4). To a large extent, a voyage "takes us." We do not take a voyage (Armstrong, 1972).

Exploring the physical oceans has held a particular intrigue and meaning for humans across the ages, as captured in poems such as Arthur Guiterman's "Sea Child," where he invokes the image that we all need to get out to sea again. The same preoccupation can be found in Melville's (1929) *Moby Dick*. "Whenever I find myself growing grave about the mouth, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can."

Thoreau, a man enthralled with sailing, reflected (in his journal entry of August 30, 1853) that "men love to be sailors, to be blown about the world setting the helm to shave the caps and see the islands disappear under our sterns. . . . It disposes to contemplation." As Bonner (1985), commented, Thoreau's

figure for meditative thought is sailing an inner sea. The ancient precept "Know thyself" becomes for Thoreau "explore thyself." And he means to evoke the figure of the grand navigator sailing to unknown worlds. "Let every man be his own Columbus and sail the inner seas of thought. (p. 4)

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Portraying humankind as travelers and seafarers, Armstrong (1972) explains, "We are all travellers upon a mysterious journey from nowhere to somewhere, peering eagerly into the mist ahead, sometimes looking back at the way we've come, but mostly occupied with keeping our vessel afloat" (p. 4).

There is something deeply compelling about the human wish to explore the seas of both the world and the mind. Perhaps this compulsion for the seafaring journey is a response to sublime beckoning—an immutable yearning to reunite with the source from whence we come.

VOYAGE UPON THE GROUP SEAS

Experiential learning about group life is much like a voyage of adventure and discovery, an exploration into the recesses of the collective mind, of the group's seascape. The journey involves bringing together thought and experience, emotion and intellect, body and spirit, without neglecting one for the other (Rioch, 1970).

Experiential groups engaged in the study of their own internal processes can be thought of as embarking on a seafaring voyage, an expedition to discover the vicissitudes of "group seas." Using this metaphor, the *group-taker*, the Kleinian term for what we now call a consultant, serves as a nautical navigator, as a professional who assists members in learning about the seascape of group life.

The special value of the term *group-taker* is the constant reminder to fully "take in" the condition of the group before making any interpretations.

Viewing group-taking as nautical navigation is not new. Rioch (1978) used the sea and the myth of Marius (a young hero who dared to seek the golden fish in the forbidden harbor) to describe why she worked as a Tavistock group relations consultant. Palmer (1985) characterized the consultant as one who "sits along the water-floods" (p. 283). Kernberg (1985), the distinguished object-relations theorist, wrote about "the couch as sea" in his psychoanalytic study of large groups and organizational leadership.

COMPARING NAUTICAL NAVIGATION AND GROUP-TAKING

Nautical navigation is the art and science of charting and plotting the direction for a seafaring vessel. Ancient mariners and explorers relied mostly on the celestial bodies, cloud formations, tides, currents, winds, and the "eye" to traverse the open seas. With advances in technology, new nautical navigational systems were developed to aid the mariner. These navigational systems can

- report on longitude and latitude of a vessel's location;
- chart the vessel's course, calculate its speed and magnetic heading, and estimate its time of arrival;
- measure surface and underwater conditions;
- assess sea temperature and velocity and the direction of the currents;

- forecast sea and weather conditions; and
- represent the ecological contours and objects to a radius of from 50 feet to 1,500 miles of the vessel.

The major navigational tools are

1. radar—ra(dio) d(etecting) and r(anging)—which detects distant objects and determines things such as velocity via high-frequency radio waves reflected from their surface;
2. sonar—so(und) na(vigation) r(anging)—which uses reflected acoustical waves to locate submerged objects;
3. loran—lo(ng) ra(nge) n(avigation)—which establishes the geographic position of a craft by using pulsed radio signals from two or more pairs of ground stations of known position; and
4. meteorological devices, which measure atmospheric pressure (barometer), temperature (thermometer), wind force and velocity (anemometer), and wind direction (weather vane).

Calculations based on data gathered via these instruments inform a seafaring vessel about its ecological context and course. They enable mariners to assess the condition of the sea.

In experiential groups, the well-trained and deeply committed group-taker uses the self, which functions like navigational instruments, as he or she works to enable groups to experientially learn about their unconscious life. Figure 1 depicts how consultants take data gathered from group seas via their sensoria to form their interpretative voices.

To explicate the concept of consultant as nautical navigator, the relationship between the group-taker's sensoria and the instruments used to read the seas is described.

1. *Vision* is analogous to radar that detects distance, objects, and the contours of the vessel's ecological niche. The consultant must see beyond what is merely enacted by group members and continuously scan/monitor the group's nonverbal exchanges, seating arrangements, physical clothing, sociometric choices, and the unconscious and symbolic language of the group.

Subtle changes in group members' appearances, clothing, hairstyles, grooming, and so forth can hold important unconscious meaning. These changes may indicate that the group's voyage is about to take a different trajectory. They may signal that the contours of the group's currents and ambience conditions are shifting, presenting a new set of learnings, obstacles, perils, and opportunities. The consultant's task is to help the group understand their course by interpreting the new seascape, the typography of the context, and the character of the currents.

Consultants must be aware of their own physical appearances, how they feel about how they look, when they change posture, cough, laugh, and so forth. They must also work at grasping how the group perceives the consultant and how to interpret those perceptions.

2. *Hearing* is analogous to sonar that detects and locates submerged objects. Skilled consultants fine tune their hearing and listen closely to the hidden and submerged objects in the group. These hidden objects might be the tone of the discussions,

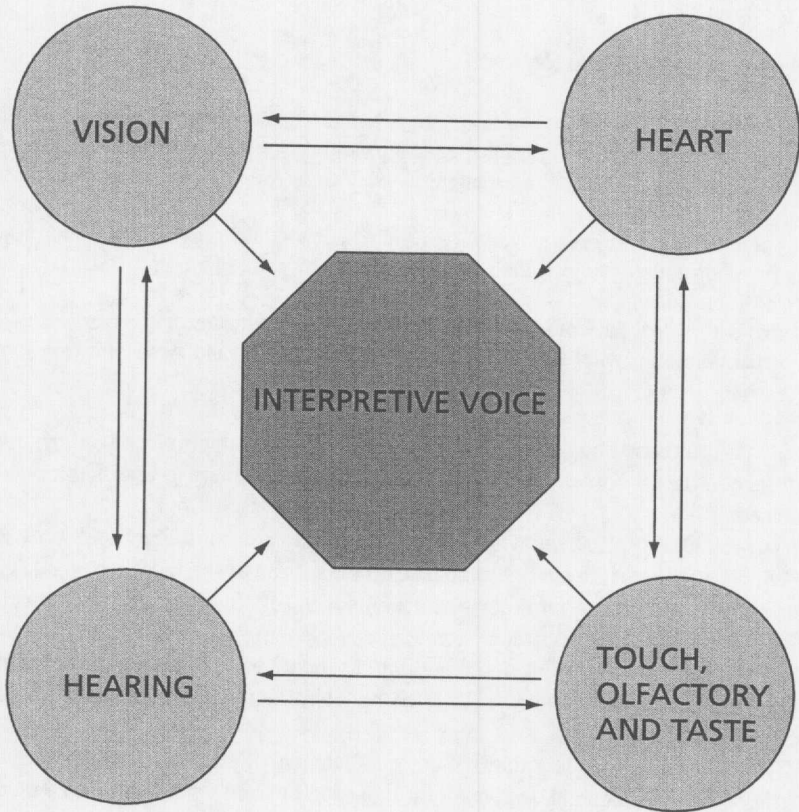


FIGURE 1: Relationship Among Group-Takers, Sensoria, and Interpretive Voice

unspoken concerns, duplicitous utterances that do not match manifest behavior, double-talking, and so forth. Also, group members may ridicule, overshadow, and/or outshout each other. A slip of the tongue, mispronunciation, oxymoron, non sequitur, and personification all offer insight into the unconscious experiences of the group. How members share their internal experiences, their dreams, fantasies, jokes, stories, and wishes are all symbolic expressions of the group's unconscious.

The group may also engage in dramatizations that remind the consultant of myths, legends, or literary works. The consultant's internal ruminations, rhythms, fantasies, and intuitions about all that happens in the group are linked to the group's unconscious seascape. Hence, those who listen to these inner dialogues have a window into the hidden aspects of the group's life.

Consultants who willingly use this data to become informed about groups' conditions are well positioned to construct their own interpretive voices.

3. *Heart* is analogous to loran that establishes the geographical location and the direction of the vessel. The group-taker must use empathy to help locate the group in its current voyage. The work of the heart is to develop the passion, courage, and compassion to engage in a deeply contactful relationship with the group.

This contactful work involves taking the role of the other. To be effective, a group-taker must risk seeing the world through the eyes of the group members while not losing sight of the primary purpose of the consultation, to provide navigational data to the participants. The consultant has to be willing to travel to every place the group goes, even if the seas are turbulent, angry, vile, or deeply intimate. He or she must also have the heart to share with the group the data that it may find disturbing, infuriating, deeply reassuring, or narcissistically wounding. Moreover, the group-taker has to suffer the group's retort to his or her interpretive work, which can be simultaneously love, contempt, idealization, thankfulness, devaluation, and so forth. The consultant needs to employ the heart in a passionately empathic way while attempting to engage in dispassionate analysis.

The consultant must understand the heart of the group (i.e., the core of the group's experience), take the group to heart (i.e., give undivided attention to the group), possess heart (i.e., have the courage to steadfastly work to understand the group), and carry the group in his or her heart (i.e., constantly keep the group as a beloved object).

4. *Touch, olfactory, and taste* are analogous to the meteorological devices such as barometer, thermometer, and so forth. Group-takers must tune into their somatic experiences. Bodily sensations often reflect the ambience condition. Because there is a oneness and unity between body and speech in normal behavior (Condon, 1977, 1978; Hall, 1984; Leonard, 1981), something like hyperventilation or a sudden fit of coughing may indicate that the member is not getting enough oxygen.

Group-takers can cull data from their own tactile senses to provide information about the group condition. Take, for example, a consultant who after a group session finds a "bitter taste" in the mouth and longs for a mint or a Life Saver. The bitterness in the consultant's mouth may be a response to the stress among group members that is building but still remains hidden. What is happening in the consultant's body may be a sympathetic expression of the group's unconscious dynamics. Another example occurs if the consultant develops a heightened sense of everyone's bodily odors, indicating a growing anxiety and restlessness about a troublesome stage of the group's journey about to be encountered.

When the group-taker brings an open heart and "comes to his or her senses," it is possible to be more connected to the group's unconscious life. By using the consultant's sensoria to collect data about the group seas, one can use the self as an instrument of the group's learning and develop an interpretive voice truly connected to the group's experience.

FINDING AND MAINTAINING ONE'S MOORINGS

Every thoughtful group-taker must appreciate, however, that sensing (be it seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, or feeling) is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for good group-taking. All sensing must be linked to a high level of understanding of the group's seas. For a mariner to use the available instruments well, he or she must have absorbed the cumulative theoretical knowledge of the ages about the ocean's function.

That is equally true for a consultant. The group-taker must be linked to, and draw upon, the knowledge that has been developed about groups. Where can one find that understanding? Where is it stored? In the various theories constructed since the formal study of group-as-a-whole phenomena began. Below, eight theoretical clusterings of the group-as-a-whole phenomena are summarized.

One might ask which is the right frame or which is the best to use? This is however an inappropriate question. Each contributes something special to our understanding of group seas and informs the group-taker about how to keep his or her sensoria linked to what earlier seafarers have come to understand.

Theoretical Frames for Understanding Group-as-a-Whole Phenomena

Basic assumption theory (Bion, 1961; Rioch, 1970; Schermer, 1985; Turquet, 1985). Here, group-as-a-whole phenomena are primarily perceived as divided into a work group and a basic assumption group that tends to assume four forms: dependency, fight/flight pairing, and fusion. There is a constant fluctuation between the work group and the basic assumption group. The basic assumption group represents defenses and manifestations of primitive anxieties.

Core fantasies and primitive psychosexual anxieties (Bion, 1961; Gibbard, 1975; Klein, 1959; Wells, 1980, 1985). Here, group-as-a-whole phenomena are primarily perceived as involving primitive anxieties and ambivalence associated with the early feeding situation. It represents the group-as-mother. The use of splitting and excessive projective identification suggest that the group evokes deeply primitive fantasies that must be changed.

Embedded intergroup theory (Alderfer, 1977, 1985, 1986; Alderfer & Smith, 1982; Alderfer & Thomas, 1988; Rice, 1969; Wells, 1982). Here, group-as-a-whole phenomena are primarily perceived as enactments of intergroup forces embedded in social context. The context influences the saliency of the various memberships that individuals hold in groups. All human transactions within the group represent intergroup dynamics, albeit sometimes unconsciously.

Group defense model (J. C. Miller et al., 1978). Here, group-as-a-whole phenomena are primarily perceived as changing patterns of defensive maneuvers that form an unconscious lattice to help group members cope with the vicissitudes and anxieties of group life.

Mythological, stereotypical, archetypal, and metaphorical analyses (Gibbard, Hartman, & Mann, 1974; Slater, 1966; Smith & Simmons, 1983; Wells & Jennings, 1983). Here, group-as-a-whole phenomena are primarily perceived as enactments of myths, fairy tales, archetypes, metaphors, and stereotypes. Group members are perceived as dramatic personae in an unconscious mythic production.

Paradoxical formulation (Palmer, 1985; Smith & Berg, 1987). Here, group-as-a-whole phenomena are primarily perceived as being inherently paradoxical and representing contradictory social forces—the substance of which groups are made. The more members seek to pull apart these contradictions, the more they become enmeshed in the self-referential binds of paradox.

Social system and role analysis (Bayes & Newton, 1976; Gibbard et al., 1974; Gould, 1985; Hirschhorn, 1985; E. J. Miller, 1976; E. J. Miller & Rice, 1967; Wells, 1980). Here, group-as-a-whole phenomena are primarily perceived as a systemic constellation of interdependent functions and roles that represent the unconscious needs, fantasies, and dynamics of the group's life.

Unconscious planning theory (Cooper & Gustafson, 1979a, 1979b; Gustafson & Cooper, 1978, 1979, 1985). Here, group-as-a-whole phenomena are primarily perceived as a struggle between clashing work groups with contrary unconscious plans that try to push the group as a whole toward conditions favorable to the development of their own subgroups. It is conceptualized that each subgroup within the group is engaged in developmental work activity.

Because group-as-a-whole phenomena are so complex, polymorphic, and multi-determined, the emergence of these eight perspectives is understandable. Each represents a different figure/ground or regional configuration of group life. The eight theories highlight different aspects of group-level processes and together create a picture that is much fuller and richer than the mere sum of its parts.

These theories help a consultant identify and compare the frames he or she is using when sensing the dynamics being "taken in" when operating in a group. They also serve as a self-correcting mechanism and make visible the potential biases we all have in our sensing and thinking about group life. Using the nautical metaphor, these theories help group-takers get and maintain their bearings when in unfamiliar and unknown waters.

There is one useful heuristic that can help the group-taker in making interpretations. Using the self as instrument means that the primary referent ultimately is the consultant. So the question to be asked is "What is overwhelming or overtaking me?" This is the starting point. However, there are many steps between this initial realization and the offering of an interpretation. What is overtaking the consultant's self probably is the product both of the hidden or covert dynamics operating in the group and of countertransference.

It is critical for the group-taker to recognize and work with both the transference and the countertransference in preparation of any utterance. Each piece of data coming

from the group and from whatever is overtaking the consultant needs to be filtered through multiple theories. This assists in sorting out what is a group-based phenomenon and what is merely an artifact of the consultant's inner reactions. Once it is clear that the dynamic on the consultant's radar screen is a product of the group, then it is best to have confidence that "what is emerging inside me is more than just me" and "to follow the direction being provided to me by the group." The more replication there is in the data, and the more the theories being used to sift through that data converge on a common motif, the more confidence one can have that the utterance the consultant is about to make is of the group, by the group, and for the group.

Although a wise consultant uses all the theories to check the sensorium, the best interpretative work is done by those who are clear about the core theoretical base from which they are operating. Those who just take whatever data and whatever theory pops into the mind are in grave danger of pushing the group into some form of eclectic chaos. Making use of the knowledge based in multiple theories is no substitute for being deeply theoretically grounded oneself.

DEVELOPING ONE'S INTERPRETIVE VOICE

What function do the sensoria (vision, heart, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting) play in the group-taker's creation of interpretations?

It is a complex process to move from the sensoria to the utterances of the consultant, which elucidate the covert, symbolic, and unconscious meanings of group life. The whole cycle is depicted in Figure 2.

The functions of this cycle are as follows:

1. Culling, scanning, and monitoring. The group-taker is constantly scanning the group's behavior and ambience conditions. Vision, hearing, heart, and tactile, olfactory, and taste sensors constitute the basic scanning devices.
2. Transduction. Data culled via the group-taker's navigational aids are converted into signals, icons, and object representations.
3. Internalization. Data are taken into the inner representational world of the group-taker, which is a composite of his or her own picture of external reality.
4. Integration and synthesis. These internalizations are then integrated with the group-taker's preexisting knowledge, concepts, and experiences with groups to form interpretations.
5. Interpretation. The group-taker is constantly generating a private set of potentially plausible hypotheses about what is happening in the group.
6. Interpretive voice. The group-taker selects a public utterance of some salient interpretation with the aim of furthering the group's exploration of its unconscious life. Such utterances at once affect and become a force in the group.

It is clear that the activity of culling, scanning, and monitoring, which constitutes just Stage 1 of the cycle, is the place where the sensoria are pivotal. The journey from this starting point of sensing to the place where a meaningful interpretive voice in any group has been created is a taxing process. In this cycle, we see the work the

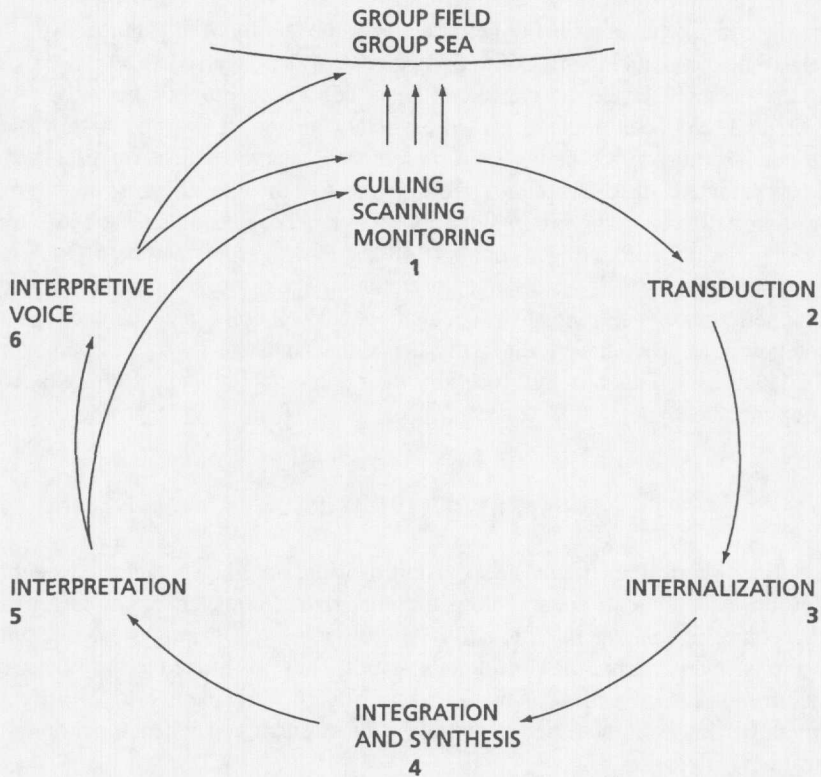


FIGURE 2: Formation of Interpretation and Interpretive Voice—A Heuristic Cycle

group-taker must do as he or she moves from what is sensed about the group to actually offering interpretations to the group as a whole.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A SELF-REFLECTIVE AND SELF-ANALYTIC POSTURE

At any point in this cycle, errors can and do occur. This makes essential a self-reflective and self-analytic posture, which has both a theoretical and a personal part to it.

At the theoretical level, the eight group-as-a-whole perspectives summarized above offer guidance about how to think through the processes represented in Figure 2. These need to be fully internalized by the group-taker who aspires to develop a rich and potent

interpretive voice. When the processes of culling, monitoring, transduction, internalization, integration, synthesis, and interpretations are passed through these theories before the consultant makes his or her utterances, the quality of the interpretive voice is greatly enhanced, and the risk of making gross errors is reduced.

At the personal level, the consultant must constantly monitor his or her own interpersonal, characterological, and idiosyncratic biases. It is imperative that the group-taker scrutinize his or her own preferences, charged object representations, valences, paratactic distortions, and so forth to see how they are affecting the interpretations being offered to the group about its behavior. The consultant must also track how social identity is affecting his or her relationship with group members. One's own demographic identity (i.e., gender, age, race/ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, cultural heritage, sexual orientation, occupation, etc.) all color one's perceptions and interpretations of group life. Additionally, consultants must have a sound appreciation for the fantasies and unconscious reactions their demographic identities might evoke in group members.

INTERPRETIVE FORMS

How does a consultant use the heart, vision, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching (the group-taker's radar, sonar, loran, barometer, thermometer, anemometer, and weather vane) in making interpretations? Below are some examples of utterances known to have come from the consultant's mouth. These are linked to the clusterings of theories discussed earlier. This listing is offered here merely to identify the interpretative interventions that group-takers have employed when functioning as nautical navigators.

Basic assumption theory—An intervention that exposes dependency. "The group is behaving as if it is inept, unable to think critically, and in search of protection from a loving parent."

Core fantasies and primitive psychosexual anxieties—An intervention that draws a link between the present and the anxieties that come from early life experiences. "The group is looking for the breast and acting as if there is insufficient nourishment for all."

Embedded intergroups—An intervention that focuses on how intergroup forces shape reactions and relations within the group. "Here, where black people are in the majority, it is impossible for a white person to be 'just a person.' You can't escape representing 'white people' and all that implies, despite your wishes and preferences."

Group defense model—An intervention that comments on the defensive maneuvers that prevent insights about deeply held anxieties and inhibitions operating in the group. "The group is behaving competitively as a way to resist studying its internal processes."

Mythological, stereotypical, archetypal, and metaphorical analyses—An intervention that makes a figurative comparison or analog with some other referent to highlight the covert pattern of group dynamics. “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?” (A parallel to the fairy tale of Snow White and the group’s apparent narcissistic preoccupation with its idealized images and the manifestation of sibling rivalry.)

Paradoxical formulation—An intervention that exposes the covert, self-referential, disconfirming, and repetitive cycle of behavior and affect that prevent group awareness and movement. “The group seems locked in a cyclic conflict which conceals the shared needs members have and creates the illusion that the warring parties have strength of conviction and are invulnerable. Such an illusion perpetuates and escalates the conflict.”

System and role analysis—An intervention that shows how roles are distributed and the unconscious functions fulfilled by those roles. “Data suggest that several roles have now emerged. We have the victim, hero, persecutor, and apathetic public.”

Unconscious planning theory—An intervention that seeks to establish a “good enough” holding environment and fosters in-depth collaboration that enables the group to experience the “courage of its own stupidity.” “It appears the difficulty here may be rooted in the struggle of achieving mutual collaboration. What do you think would happen if the group really engaged in mutual sharing and exploration?”

The one remaining task in this paper is to show how the navigational tools of the group-taker start the cycle that ends with a consultative interpretation. I think . . .

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to reorient and refine the craft of group-taking. To do this work requires courage, commitment, and competence, but above all, it requires love. Working with groups is based on the ancient Greek concept of agape. Love for mankind is the source of the group-taker’s courage. Love of learning is the source of the group-taker’s commitment. Love and wonder of being fully human is the source of the group-taker’s competence. This work involves . . .

A Personal Note

As I (Kenwyn K. Smith) worked on this document by our beloved colleague, I thought often of unfinished symphonies. The final section still needed to be drafted, and the few sentences Wells had written for a conclusion seemed as much the beginning of the next paper as an end to this one. I longed to know how Leroy would have drawn this to a conclusion and where he might have taken us next. Rather than add a few final pages that could only be my guess about what he ultimately would have done, I have elected to let the paper remain unfinished. It is a stark reminder of a loved one taken

too soon from our midst but whose brilliance and compassion shines bright in the night sky and offers guidance to all seeking to cross troublesome waters.

Kenwyn K. Smith

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